

*Teaching Guide*

# Fire Safety for Older Persons



# Fire Safety for Older Persons

## Instructor Outline

### Introduction

#### ■ Goals:

To ensure that older adults have the skills to protect themselves and their homes from fire.

#### ■ Objectives:

Participants should be able to:

- recognize their increased risk of injury and death by fire.
- identify common home fire hazards and show how to prevent them.
- demonstrate the correct response in the event of a fire.
- describe the correct method of testing and maintaining home smoke detectors.

#### ■ Materials:

Your facility's emergency response plan (if residential living community).

Brochures (obtained from Seattle Fire Department)

***Fire Safety Tips For Older Adults, Smoke Detectors, Fire Safety Checklist***

9-1-1 phone stickers

Video (obtained from Seattle Fire Department)

***Senior Fire Safety with Jonathan Winters***

### Instructor Information

#### ■ Older Americans are at a greater risk from fire.

For Americans 65 and older, the fire fatality rates are more than twice the national average. For those over 75, they jump to three times the national average, and for those over 85, they are four times the national average.

#### ■ Leading causes of home fire deaths.

Three of the leading causes of home fire deaths for older adults are smoking accidents, faulty or misused heating equipment, and cooking accidents. Many of these fire deaths could be prevented. Smoke detectors cut your risk of dying in a home fire in half. You can cut your risk even more by practicing fire safety and developing and practicing a fire escape plan.

## ■ Special considerations for older persons.

The ideal home layout - for older adults or people with disabilities - is an open, flowing floor plan accommodating wheelchairs and walkers. Of course, few people have the option of designing their living quarters, but they can at least make the best use of the area they have by locating bedrooms nearest the exits and arranging furniture to allow for maximum mobility.

## ■ Fire safety products for older persons.

There is an array of products to make life safer and easier for those with specific needs, including: Smoke detection systems with strobe lights, fans, or bed vibrators to alert people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Flashlight-sensitive test buttons on smoke detectors to eliminate the need for climbing to reach the detector itself. Pull-out ironing boards at wheelchair height and irons with automatic shut-off switches.

## ■ Smoke detectors

Smoke detectors are a critical component of any home fire safety program. Have a smoke detector on each level and outside each sleeping area. Make sure that they're tested regularly. (Use a broom handle or stick to test detectors that are too high to reach.) Replace batteries yearly (an easy way to remember is daylight savings time in October) or sooner if a chirping sound indicates low power.

The Seattle Fire Department may be able to provide and install free battery-operated smoke detectors for low-income seniors living in their own homes. For more information on this program, call the Public Education Office at 386-1338.

## ■ A reminder

Keep eye glasses, a telephone, and walking aids by the bed to help ensure as speedy an escape as possible.



## ■ Elevators

Elevators should never be used during a fire emergency. The reason is three fold: 1) elevators often fail during a fire, trapping occupants; 2) elevator shafts may fill with smoke; and 3) the elevator needs to be available for the use of arriving firefighters. Occupants must exit by way of stairwells only. For information on evacuation procedures for non-ambulatory persons, refer to the handout ***Fire Evacuation Procedures For Persons Unable To Use Exit Stairs***. Call 386-1338 for a copy.

## ■ Calling 911

Whenever you need the assistance of police, fire or emergency medical personnel, you only need to remember one phone number - **911**. It's important for people calling 911 to be able to give the following information: nature of the problem, location, address, nearest cross street, any specifics known. The caller should not hang up until told to do so by the emergency operator.

## ■ If unable to leave the building

If you are unable to leave the building because you are trapped or have limited mobility, you should create an area of refuge for yourself:

**Seal the room.** Use wet cloth to stuff around cracks in doors and seal up vents to protect against smoke.

**Do not break windows.** Flames and smoke can come back in from the outside. If you need air, open the window a crack.

**Stay low under smoke.** The freshest air is near the floor. Keep a wet cloth over your nose and mouth, breath through your nose only.

**Signal for help.** Use the telephone, or hang something in the window.

## Lesson Outline

Using the following outline will help your program proceed smoothly, and of course you may adapt it to suit your particular situation. In addition to respect and concern for older adults, an understanding of their life situation will be helpful in working with them on fire safety issues. Safety and security are primary concerns of seniors, and enlisting their active participation in the program will reinforce the idea that fire safety is an area where they can take control.

Some older people must contend with the physical and mental limitations that accompany aging and make aspects of life more complicated. They may respond best to suggestions that are practical, easily understood, and easily performed. Wherever possible, it's important to include alternatives for those with specific disabilities.

It is recommended that you preview the film and read through this guide and the accompanying brochures before you conduct your program. If you are familiar with these materials and prepared to lead your group in discussion, your job will be much easier.

### ■ Introduce the problem.

Overall, older Americans have twice the average risk of death from fire in the home. However, every individual can learn basic fire prevention techniques that will reduce the risk.

### ■ Show the film *Fire Safety with Jonathan Winters*.

### ■ Discuss the film and the issues it presents.

Encourage your group to participate as much as possible in reviewing and explaining the key points of the film. Don't be concerned if the discussion strays from the specific topics or questions you present. As long as the group's ideas are relevant to fire safety issues in the home, your discussion will be productive. In addition, you may use the handout ***Fire Safety Tips for Older Adults*** to help guide your discussion.

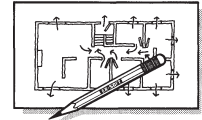
Ask if anyone in the group has ever had an experience with fire. What happened? Did they respond correctly? Should they have done anything differently? What caused the fire? Could it have been prevented?

---

Discuss the important prevention techniques to use when cooking...when smoking...when using electrical appliances...when using heating equipment.

### ■ Escape planning

Have participants plan escape routes from their homes - two routes out of each room - by sketching a floor plan on paper or at least making a list of each room and possible exits. Encourage them to help each other do this. Are there problem areas? Would a small bedroom with only one exit be better used for another purpose than a room with two exits? Should a first floor room be used for a bedroom rather than a second floor room? Are all windows and doors free of furniture or clutter that could impede escape?



### ■ Distribute handouts

Distribute the brochures and 9-1-1 phone stickers. Encourage participants to put a 9-1-1 sticker on every phone in their house, making sure their address is written clearly on the sticker, and to use the handout ***Fire Safety Checklist*** to survey their home for fire hazards that need correction.